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National

# Portraits of a city under siege

By Alex Strick van Linschoten
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**Alex Strick van Linschoten reports from Kandahar, a city scarred by daily violence and nervously awaiting the attention of America's next offensive.**

If you want to find out how insecure Kandahar has become, visit the glass-fitter in the bazaar. If he's wearing a new waistcoat you'll know that business is booming and things are bad: every explosion in the centre of the city blows out most windows in a two kilometre radius. Most offices, shops and government departments are squeezed into a small section of town – Kandahar really does resemble a town more than a city – and all these people have just replaced all their windows for the ninth time in two years.

Almost nine years of mismanagement and neglect have allowed the Taliban to rebuild their movement as a heterogenous collection of insurgent franchises; Afghan government institutions have alienated large swathes of local society and pushed them directly into the hands of Taliban recruiters. The hope and promise of the first few years died a slow death in full view of the public, as allies supported and funded by foreign governments used their influence and power for their own purposes. All this was expertly exploited by the Taliban, who now are the de facto authority in Kandahar City and in the outlying districts: shops and markets pay taxes to a central authority, warning letters to "government collaborators" receive an official "Islamic Emirate" stamp, and deals between district government officials and their Taliban counterparts are par for the course outside the city.

Conditions in Kandahar have rapidly deteriorated over just the past three months. Bombs, attacks and assassinations were already fairly common, but not enough to make you think

about whether or not to visit someone for a meeting. Nowadays, life for many takes place within four walls: some families have stopped letting their children leave the house for fear that they get caught up in an attack. Some translators and drivers have started to demand that the few foreign journalists who pass through town wrap their heads in a patu or light blanket so as to be unrecognisable.

Kandaharis like to swear even on a good day, but the present situation seems designed to give them plenty of opportunity: I had just arrived back after a couple of months away and heard stories of how 'everything has changed'. "You remember how we drove down to the Pakistani border a few months ago?" one friend says. "Well that's over now. Arghestan is gone." Gone to the Taliban, it seems – whereas before the Talibs who lived there seemed to be operating under the basis of some kind of gentleman's agreement with the government, now they have been joined or replaced by outsiders, who have started to intimidate and harass locals. One young man who worked as an assistant in last summer's flawed and fraudulent elections was taken from his home and shot. Another was beaten.

Assassinations trouble the rich, powerful, or anyone associated with foreigners or the Afghan government. Almost every day brings news of a tribal elder, businessman or a translator taken from his home, or shot dead nearby. Disappearances are increasingly common, but Kandaharis don't understand the logic behind this new trend. "If you're a kidnapper, you demand money," mused one friend. "If you're a Talib doing this for jihad, you just kill the guy. But these vanishings... I don't get it." These are all signs, Kandaharis say, evidence of a new radicalisation of the fighting parties: whereas before the bodies of the dead would be given a proper burial, now families must hold off on their mourning until a proper burial is held – and many are still waiting, years after their relatives were taken.

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A new strategy outlined by General Stanley McChrystal and endorsed by Barack Obama in November 2009 advocated for a temporary troop "surge" in Afghanistan and a use of counterinsurgency tactics to reverse the current downward slip of the war.

Kandahar is at the centre of this experiment: the Taliban have always claimed southern Afghanistan as their heartland and support base, and nothing so far has disrupted that perception. Resources withheld from the south in the wake of the Iraq War are now being doubled and recommitted in the face of what looks more and more like failure, and a last-ditch attempt is being made to tip the scales in favour of the Afghan government, if only temporarily.

General David Petraeus paid the province a brief visit last week, announcing to local journalists that "the enemy is going to take horrific actions to disrupt the progress that Afghan and coalition civilian and military elements are working so hard to achieve."

That's small comfort for locals who have to live out the summer in the city. Even without

the violence, temperatures regularly reach 48 degrees and there is almost no electricity supply to speak of.

The plan to focus on Kandahar City was announced at the beginning of the year, just as a separate military offensive in neighbouring Helmand province was drawing to a close. There, in Marjah, the aim was to drive the Taliban out and to replace it with a functioning system that offered local people some basic services, the so-called 'government-in-a-box'. Reports written since the conclusion of that operation suggest that the installation of legitimate Afghan government representation in the far-off hinterlands is proving difficult. The Taliban have stepped up their campaign of intimidation and fear through threats and assassination.

For Kandahar this summer, the goal seems to be equally simple: reverse the trends of previous years, which saw the Taliban gain strength and popularity in the face of the Afghan government's descent into illegitimacy and corruption. This implies two targets of the campaign. The US military (with the Afghan army in tow) will carry out a focused campaign against the Taliban in the areas they currently dominate; this will – the argument runs – demonstrate to ordinary Kandaharis that a new force has come to the south, one that means to stay.

As a second front, efforts will be taken to reform and reintroduce the Afghan government to the people of Kandahar. This will mean closer supervision and attention to local representatives from the police to the judiciary to the provincial council. The end goal, as publicly stated, is for the people of southern Afghanistan to shift their support from the Taliban – the best bet in the area for many, for all its flaws – to the institutions and figures that represent the Afghan government.

Ahmed Shah, 42 years old, spent time in Europe as a refugee but returned in 2001 to set up a youth organisation. He now runs a construction company operating in the south, and believes that the foreign forces' new strategy has much to recommend it. "This McChrystal guy gets it," he said. "But he's going to have problems in Kandahar. If only they'd do things properly, they could really tackle the problem." A key point of difficulty would be raised, he said, when the foreign troops tried to meddle in local politics.

Kandahar offers ample proof of the ways conflict can change the lives of even those not directly involved, and most people you talk to in Kandahar aren't as supportive of the new military strategy, even if they understand exactly what it will involve. Public statements about the Kandahar operation – rechristened Operation Hope – have shifted in focus since the original announcement. At the moment, McChrystal and ISAF strategists talk of a "process", one focused more on political change to the structures of Afghan governance than military operations against the Taliban.

This belies the prospect of the coming summer: tens of thousands of extra soldiers – in fact the fourth troop 'surge' in as many years – will arrive in the province to do what soldiers do best. Counterinsurgency can lend their activities a certain focus, but militaries come with a certain toolbox and it's difficult for them to operate outside the political

constraints set back in Europe and the United States. The military are the main – if not only – representatives of the US government down in Kandahar City, but they cannot take the kinds of decisions or make the kinds of deals that a civilian representative would.

This is not to say that the presence of additional troops and increased operations aren't already having an impact on local residents: clashes are regularly heard in the early hours of the morning in Mahalajat, an area not usually classified as falling within city limits but actually just a stone's throw away from many government buildings.

There are now so many supply convoys travelling to and fro that a previous unspoken understanding – that these convoys would drive round the city rather than straight through – seems to have been abandoned. These immediately bring Kandahar's small road system to gridlock when soldiers insist that Afghans maintain a distance from their vehicles. Previous years have borne out the logic of this preventative measure: suicide bombers on foot or in cars frequently attacked Canadian convoys in the city. Foreign militaries have learnt the lessons of recent years and now use heavily armoured tanks resistant to all but the largest explosions. Afghans living or shopping in the areas where these convoys pass through are not so fortunate.

"I don't understand why they drive through the city," said one shopkeeper who sells vegetables close to a common transit route. "It was better before, when they went around the city, but now we face many problems every time they are attacked."

The frequency of night raids – military operations and arrests conducted at night by special forces together with Afghan troops – has also increased in the city and the areas that surround it.

A man named Abdul Khaliq was recently taken from his home in such a raid, and held for several weeks before being released without charge. "I even had to pay money to the Afghan authorities to get out of prison," he said. "Who do these people think they are, coming to my home, scaring my children, arresting me and my friends? Do they think this is winning them any friends?"

Some even see a malign conspiracy in the surge of foreign troops. A middle-aged man who moved to the city from the districts in order to get work explained it as follows: "If they wanted to defeat the Taliban, they could have done so years ago," he said. "They have so many things: electronics, spies, satellites, money – Oh! the money! – that I can't believe they aren't able to beat the Taliban if they want to."

This is one of the more troubling sides to the Battle for Hearts and Minds. Even senior local government figures are tempted to wonder about the real intentions of foreigners for Afghanistan. "I don't really understand how they're using us or how it will play out," one of them told me. "Perhaps it has something to do with China or Central Asian oil, but regardless I am certain that what they are doing at the moment doesn't make sense. If they gave the order the Taliban would be gone by 6pm tomorrow evening."

When large explosions kill and injure civilians in the city, the first assumption for many is not necessarily to blame the Taliban. After a fuel tanker exploded in a crowded city area last August following the elections, for example, I found three separate individuals who – in the moments before the blast – had seen a foreign airplane swoop past and launch a missile. This was not what actually happened. By all accounts it was the accidental detonation of a Taliban suicide truck-bomb, but that doesn't really matter. Perception is king, and the perception is perpetually sceptical of foreign intentions.

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There aren't any trained professional psychologists in the province any more, not since a couple of years at any rate, but I met with a lecturer at Kandahar University who teaches psychology and Pashto literature. Ayatullah Rafiqi has been head of Kandahar's Education Department for several years and said that psychological problems are omnipresent in Kandahari society. "The last 30 years of war," he said, "have caused innumerable problems for Afghans living in the south. First we had the 1980s jihad, where our society was divided between Communists and mujahedeen, then we had the civil war, where the rights of ordinary people were stamped out. Then the Taliban, and now this."

Even those not directly affected by the war, he said, were facing its consequences. "Among some families nothing has happened to them, yet they are depressed. We have a different culture here, a culture of networks. Every family has a network and each network has some kind of a problem, so the depression comes from that."

Another university professor sitting in on our conversation was keen to add to the list of more mundane problems. "Most people have lost their ability to focus or to concentrate. People aimlessly count numbers in their heads, or have other strange mental tics. We see everything, but we are powerless to control anything."

Kandahar presents an ugly face before the world, one whose scars betray decades of conflict. Conditions have deteriorated since the comparative freedoms of 2002 and a dog-eat-dog mentality has become the norm. Economic and political life is sustained only by those who have moved to fill the positions of people who have left for calmer parts of the country. The Kandahar residents holding official positions or owning companies are arguably the dregs of local society: able to hold their own in an increasingly violent environment but unable to offer ordinary residents a different future. As this summer's offensive grows closer and bombs continue to detonate, still more people are leaving the city, selling their land or sending their families to Quetta or Kabul.

The younger generations have it hardest of all. They aren't old enough to remember the years before the war, before life as a refugee, and don't see any change in their lives. One friend explained the scenario facing young people: "You have two basic hopes as a young person in Kandahar, for those not fighting with the Taliban. Either you study hard enough to get a scholarship or a temporary visa to study abroad, or you set up a construction company and work hard to make enough money to get a visa to leave the country or go to

Kabul."

Few young people in Kandahar view politics as offering a stable future or a good life; at best it's viewed as a way to amass power and wealth. For those trying to earn a living, often the only option is to work for a private security company – fodder for the Taliban.

Aymal Farouqi, 23 years old, commands a group of soldiers for a local security company that escort ISAF convoys along the main highway, from Kabul to Kandahar and from Kandahar to Herat. The first time I meet him he is interrupted by a phone call; one of his deputies informs him that one of their convoys has been attacked, a car taken by the Taliban and several of their men held hostage. His men, he says, are being held at the bottom of a well and the Taliban are pouring ice-cold water down onto them.

"This is normal," he said. "Some people want money, others want weapons. And some just kill them." He explained how most of his soldiers were young people who needed to support their families. I ask him how many of his friends have died in the two years he has been working at the company. "Sixty-seven," he replies without skipping a beat. And how many injured? "Oh, that's uncountable. We can't put a number on that."

Mawlawi Sayyed Mohammad Hanifi and Mawlawi Hekmatullah, the head and spokesman of Kandahar's association of religious clerics, sit on the ground in a compound in the centre of Kandahar City and talk about the work they are doing to counter the Taliban's message. "Jihad is not just about Kalashnikovs and bombs," Hanifi says. "It's about spreading the good. It's about the pen. It's about God. What the Taliban are doing is just one part of jihad."

Founded in 2002, the shura or council of clerics that operates in Kandahar has also suffered its fair share of losses. Since 2001, 23 members of the council have been killed and many others threatened. Nowadays, as they are high up on the list of Taliban targets, their offices are located in an Afghan Army barracks.

"In the Qur'an," Mawlawi Hekmatullah says, "it is written that there should be a group of people who preach Islam to the people. They should give a voice of unity. The foreigners are necessary, but they need to change, they need to provide something, playing a big role." The council members run their own radio station – Islam Ghag or The Voice of Islam in the mornings, preaching to the people.

Mawlawi Hanifi, a white-bearded elder originally from Helmand, explained that their mission was to invite people to national peace, to remove corruption from the government administrations, to explain that growing, consuming or smuggling drugs was not good in any time or any place, and most importantly to explain that terrorism was wrong – against Islam – to tell people to live their lives properly.

They have representatives in the districts, but given their living conditions and de facto confinement it seems unlikely that they are able to have any significant impact outside

the city. The Taliban's campaign to assassinate them, though, indicates their potential impact if there were enough security for them to travel and preach.

Gul Mohammad is someone the clerics would probably like to talk to if they knew he existed. Originally from one of the districts west of Kandahar City, he has an occasional on-and-off relationship with the Taliban fighters in the areas he grew up. Sometimes he'll fight against the foreigners, but these days he's trying to make some money in the construction industry that is wholly fuelled by the foreign military presence.

"I just love the feel of a PK heavy machine gun in my hands," he says. "You haven't tried it? Really, you should, it's the best feeling in the world. TAK....TAK...TAK..." (he mimes with an imaginary gun). Gul Mohammad is an occasional Talib, not fighting for money but out of boredom. An argument is often made that the Taliban support is high because recruits receive salaries – higher salaries than those of the Afghan National Army – but I have yet to meet a low-ranking Talib who receives anything that resembles a regular payment from his commanders.

The camaraderie and excitement of an attack once every so often is enough for stories and tales weeks afterwards. Gul Mohammad's fight isn't a jihad. It's a weekend sport.

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Malalai is a young female social worker from Kandahar City, working to monitor human rights abuses against women. She doesn't think the foreign troop surge will bring any benefits for women. "Sometimes the root of the problem for women are the military troops themselves. When I go to work in the morning, they disturb the ordinary people. If they disturb us, who should we complain to?" None of the bigger problems – first and foremost, security – were being addressed, she said.

"The situation is getting worse day by day," she said. "Women are at risk just like everyone else, but these assassinations are the most dangerous concern for us. Most women have left their jobs in the past few months after they received warning letters from the Taliban."

When I began asking friends and contacts in Kandahar what they thought of the coming military operation back in January, hardly anyone had anything positive to say. In fact, the only person with any hope was Aymal Farooqi, the young security commander from Arghandab who had seen dozens of his friends killed in Taliban attacks.

Could he envision a positive future for himself and for the city, I asked. "Yes," he said. "I would be very happy to sit together with the Taliban in five years time, drinking tea and enjoying the beautiful valley view and the flowers. Security would be better and the people would work together."

One week ago, Aymal had left his offices to spend a few hours with friends. As he was walking back, a massive car bomb exploded a few hundred metres up the road from

where he was standing. All of the soldiers that he commanded were killed, and many more of his friends severely injured. Kandahar is bracing itself for a summer of violence.

The names of some interviewees have been changed for their protection.